



Capitalocene, Waterscape and Human Questions: Reading Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake*

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Abstract— In the era of capitalocene, natural resources including water and waterscapes are to be used for profit based vision. Capitalism provides access to the resources to the rich of the resources while the marginalized sections of the society face scarcity and are forced to live in inhabitable environmental conditions. In the name of materialistic progress, capitalist activities fuel the degradation of the environment. This phenomena casts severe irrevocable impacts on nature, and on the lives of "ecosystem people" destroying their interrelationship with the non-human world (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, p. 3). The perception of exceptionalism and exemptionalism nourish the causes of exploitation of the non-human world, biodiversity, ecological balance, and segregation of humans from non-human. Akkineni Kutumbarao's Telugu novel *Kolleti Jladalu* translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran as *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020) presents water contamination and passive death of the largest freshwater lake in India. This eco-memoir echoes the exploitative deeds of the greedy and the consequences of such anthropocentric conducts. This paper shall attempt to study multifarious engagement with water by employing theoretical perspectives from the field of Blue Humanities and Ecocriticism. This paper also intent to read capitalocene's slow violence with an emphasis on how the corporate culture disrupt the interrelationship between human and non-human in Kolleru, the village beside the lake, how the degradations, contamination of the lake affects marginalized communities and nature, and how the lake influences the identities of the people.



Keywords— Blue Ecocriticism, Capitalocene, Human/Non-human, Identity, Water

Environmental deterioration in the contemporary time, caused by human anthropocentric activities, has become a planetary crisis in scale with its vast magnitude. Modern ideas of development, industrialisation, deforestation, urbanization, resources extractions lead to the manifold dilapidation including alteration of the holistic life support system on Earth. The impacts of insensitive human wrecking of the environment contrive the anthropocene. In the article, "The "Anthropocene"" Paul. J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000) used the term "Anthropocene" to mark a turning point of the relation between humans and the planet Earth (p. 17). With the term, the two authors denote the human being's entering into a new geological epoch (p. 17). Human activities likely the "modification of survival condition" from introduction of modified agricultural systems to the creation of steam engines in 1784 which

contributed to the industrial revolutions accentuate the existence of the Anthropocene (Cusumano, 2023, p. 151). However, the perceptions of the Anthropocene have been proved to be inadequate, when it comes to assigning responsibility for the deterioration of the environment. This concept considers the whole of humanity is responsible for the environmental degradation, but the indigenous people from the Global South and poor people of the North have been living in coherence with nature. Moreover, these indigenous tribal people bear the brunt of the exploitation. However, recent studies claim the more specific cause of the climate change and deterioration of the environment is capitalism. Klein observes that the true power behind the climate crisis is 'neo capitalism' and not the whole of humanity (as cited in Cusumano, 2023, p. 152). His arguments shift the focus from anthropos to capitalism and

to the Global North's monstrous economic prosperity at the cost of planetary crisis as the primary causes (Cusumano, 2023, p. 152). "Complimentary to the Anthropocene" the epoch Capitalocene accentuates the vivid occupancy of capitalism as responsible force for the planetary crisis (Cusumano, 2023, p. 154). The term "Capitalocene" stands for the perception that "our ecological crises are precipitated not by humans in some undifferentiated and generalized way, but more specifically by the global spread of capitalism and its social economic ecological injustices" (Arons, 2020, p. 16). While the principals of Anthropocene consider anthropocentric activities responsible for environmental crises, these implicitly convey that the whole humankind is the sole source of the devaluation of the environment, and disregard the fact of diversified human existence in different territories of the world interacting uniquely with the environment. It constructs homogenous strata of humans which deny the differences between those who create the nuisance of climatic inconveniences and those who bear the brunt of the consequences. Industrial emissions, corporate policies, inconsiderate extractions of natural resources, mindless use of waterscapes, and forests contribute to the depletion of the environment while, irrespective of the fact of contributing a little to the environmental causes, the indigenous, tribal people who live in harmony with the environment through sustainable ways of living are the first to suffer the repercussions. Jason W. Moore (2016) introduced the concept Capitalocene and discussed the contaminated and endangered climate as the consequences of domination of the capitalistic system prompted by profit, accumulation and exploitation. He rightly argues in the introduction of the book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, "...the Capitalocene does not stand for capitalism as an economic and social system. It is not a radical inflection of Green Arithmetic. Rather, the Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (p. 6). Thus, the principals of Capitalocene, specifies the capitalistic anthropocentric acts drive the environmental degradation which is planetary in scale.

Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020), originally published in Telugu, later translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran depicts the life and slow death of Kolleru lake and its interconnection with its inhabitants. Kalpana Kannabiran calls the novel an "ecological memoir (or eco-memoir)" (Kutumbarao, p. 2020, ix). The narrative is unfolded by Srinivasa Rao's remembering the past about his childhood and the glory of the lake Kolleru. His childhood memory brings the simple but difficult life of his people and how they live coherently with the fresh water lake, Kolleru and its non-human inhabitants. The life in the

past was different in the village, the present states of the lake as well as some of the villagers are corrupted by the greed of capitalistic, materialistic gain.

Srinivasa remembers his childhood memories of his rural life in Pulaparuru. From his account emerges an image of lives and livings of his people, their dependency on the lake Kolleru and the nature for their substantive living. He describes Kolleru as alive, an active force of nature which nurtures all kinds of lives in it:

Water all around. In the distance the island villages. The water full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches...not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water a wealth of green grasses waving in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses the cattle, birds and insects. All living things depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony, Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 101)

However, in the present time, Kolleru has lost its gleamy vitality. Srinivasa Rao's emotive narration exhibits the deterioration of the lake, as a human caused catastrophe induced by capitalistic greed. The eco-memoir unfolds Kolleru's declination from an enriched ecosystem fostering multi-species to a stagnant rotten waterscape. The novel opens with the contrasted articulation of the past and present state of the lake. The narrator describes:

The lake Srinivasa Rao looked out. The lake which should have stretched out boundlessly before his eyes lay in tattered strips. Kolleru, once dense with plants and creepers and flowers, lay bare before him like shards of shattered glass. Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone? Like a map of the world divided wantonly by crooked boundaries Kolleru was split by bunds. Broken bunds. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 1)

After sixty years, returning from the city, Srinivasa looked at Kolleru and couldn't recognize the state of the lake. The lives of multiple species get shattered, a tremendous number of fish tanks engulf the lakefront and reach the village area (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 1). The narrator Shrinivas recalls the childhood memories of the lake's gleamy past, the lake spanned "several hundred acres" with "vibrant water" flowing "majestically" (1). Kolleru, once the nourishing mother, is now a fallen waterscape, a "filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs, a danger to the environment, a toxic net for birds" (2). Mighty Kolleru was once, "Stretching across two hundred and sixty square miles between the Krishna and West Godavari districts, Kolleru

was one of the biggest freshwater lakes in Asia" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 10). It used to get its fresh water as well as dirty water from the rivers namely Budaleri, Naguleru, Akkilluru, Sammiveru and some sixty-seven canals (10). The lake shares a deep relationship with the people, and people were engaged with the lake for multiple purposes. Human interaction with the non-human world gets more vivid with the arrival of migrated birds to the lake. Srinivasa recalls during summer, "countless birds from across the world would come like faraway travellers to brighten the land with their colours" and to make the "place vibrant with the sound of their music" (10). Such experiences attracted the people of Kolleru to remain connected with the waterscape and it enriches their connectivity to the waterscape and the lake waters, "permeates [their] emotions and imagining, providing metaphors to think with" (Strang, 2015, p. 7). Kolleru's waterscape sustains the diversity of organisms. The waterscape holds together "songs of the birds" that seek to hunt for food and "calls of the fishermen who had come in search of fish" and all these sounds together would make "a hundred ragas and notes" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 88). Multi-species presence in Kolleru depicts the collaboration and coexistence of human and non-human entities. The waterscape serves its purposes in a significant way. Through the water of the lake, the indigenous people and other non-human species sustain their existence by setting up reciprocal connectivity.

Kolleru, being a Lake and surrounded by land and inhabitants, is "more culturally diverse and closely connected" to the human lives and culture (Mentz, 2024, p. 80). According to Steve Mentz (2024), "connectivity defines all watery bodies, from vast oceans and large rivers to streams and lakes" (p. 80). Kolleru, as a waterbody, carries this significant characteristic. It sustains connectivity among multiple species contributing the place's biodiversity, as the narrator recalls:

Water all around. In the distance the island villages. The water full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches...not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water a wealth of green grasses waving in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses the cattle, birds and insects. All living things depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony, Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 101)

It is very crucial to be connected with "the more-than-human aquatic communities" (Oppermann, 2023, p. 48) to sustain the environmental health and to stop "hemorrhaging

species" (Rose, 2017, p. G52). "Failing connectivities" (Rose, 2017, p. G52) among species leads to destruction of the overall environmental balance and decreasing the survival potentialities. Srinivasa recalls the images of how the animals in his village carried a symbiotic relationship. He remembers "Some birds sat on the buffaloes' ears, cleaning them. As the buffaloes roamed the birds roamed with them so that their work was done at the same time as the buffaloes" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 7-8). He also described how his father used to call other villagers, animals, birds "our people" and believed "There was nothing in nature that was not 'ours'" (28). The villagers co-exist with the surrounding nature. The adequacy of the Natural resources sustain their lives, in exchange they perform stewardship as well. The waterscape dictates their lives and lifestyle and prevents them from becoming greedy. The people within Kolleru, tend to stay connected with their roots, their lives and livings are centred around the Kolleru. Their substantive farming and fishing indicates human and nature interrelation. Hence, this is a living testimony that "human relationship with its environment is continuous and inescapable" (Sarkar & Karmakar, 2021, p. 1309). Inhabitants within Kolleru were not fond of over accumulation and over consumption, one of the features of the Capitalocene. Their livelihood was based on sustainable ways of living and consumption. It helps them to establish a reciprocal relationship among the inhabitants which leads to a sustainable human culture. Though Kolleru, was not always a motherly nourishing figure, in time it could take a destructive avatar as well, which erects obstacles through natural disaster like flood in their course of lives (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 154-55). However, people within Kolleru adjust their work strategy in accordance with the Kolleru's natural course. Nevertheless, this harmonious coexistence is about to cease to exist and the congenial relationship between human and nature is disturbed as some villagers have started to treat the mighty Kolleru as a means of earning more profit rather than substantive earning.

However, the deterioration of the Kolleru lake and the biodiversity of the place distorted the relationship between the environment and the inhabitants. The people of the village depend on the resources of the lake and the land area can be termed as "ecosystem people" (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, p. 3; Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997, p. 12; Nixon, 2011, p. 22). According to Gadgil and Guha (1995), ecosystem people "depend on the natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs" (p. 3). The waterscape of Kolleru provides fish, mussels and the nearby lands provide rice and crops. The ecosystem people sustain their lives on the freshwater resources but the conflict over the controlling of the resources alienates them from themselves and from their ecosystem. Often

unnoticed, these types of conflicts in micro and macro level lend people to acquire natural resources and control the means of production, which leads to the exploitation (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, p. 2). Moreover, the competition for resources results in exploitation of the Environment and other non-human entities. Hence, this competition breaks the harmony between human, environment and non-human and the symbiotic relation among them.

In capitalocene, the economic system expands its territory and this expansion never stops (Frame, 2023, p. 11). The capital structure to strengthens market economy becomes blind to two other kinds of economics; the "nature's economy", and the "sustenance economy" (Shiva, 2006, p. 15). The novel exhibits the destruction of "nature's economy" at the hand of Capitalocene's uncontrolled materialistic use of the waterscape (Shiva, 2006, p. 15). Inconsiderate uses of waterscape for corporate or capitalistic purposes of inhabitants within Kolleru unmasks "Capitalism's governing conceit" that "it may do with nature as it pleases" in order to feed their materialistic hunger (Moore, 2017, p. 601). Moreover, "the short-termism and profit driven motives of such 'achievements' end up doing substantial damage to the network of natural and cultural systems" (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 7). For the quick accumulation of profit, some people within Kolleru misused the lake's water resources which led to the destruction of sustainability of the water.

In capitalist system, some people nurture the non-reciprocal, dominating attitude towards natural resources which leads to destruction of natural cohabitation, nonetheless, the consequences must be carried by the poor people "ecosystem people" and non-human members (Frame, 2023, p. 11; Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997, p. 16; Nixon, 2011, p. 47). The novel exhibits that the ecosystem and the indigenous people of Kolleru are the victims of capitalism's encroachment. Capitalism's exploitation of the water resources of Kolleru incorporates the idea that waterscapes are "intimately connected to the question of capitalism's intensive and extensive logic of expansion" (Menozzi, 2020, p. 2). The occurrence of private ownership and inconsiderate use of Kolleru's waterbody bring the blue capitalism into action which has divided the society, "hierarchically into centre and periphery" (Foster & Clark, 2004, p. 187) and this ownership and control over resources partially bring "growth of affluence" to few (urban based) powerful, capitally advanced people while destroying substantive living of the communities who are "depending on the local resources" (Shiva, 1991, p. 27). In Pulaparu village, there are mainly two castes in the village, the Kammadoras, who farmed and the Vaddirajas who fished. The Vaddis became greedy and forcibly colonised the fresh water of Kolleru, which fed the inhabitants within Kolleru

for a long time. The capitalist tendency of infinite accumulation has destroyed the villagers' ideas of communal coexistence. They have started fighting over ownership over the harvest rather than dividing equally among them. This has created the hierarchy within the community which has disrupted Kolleru people's co-relation among themselves and with non-human entities including lake Kolleru. The Vaddis's desire of over accumulation of wealth lead to the destruction of the lake Kolleru as they establish fish tanks on Kolleru. Srinivasa recalls, "When Kolleru was a lake village the thousands of Vaddis here lived in huts and wore loin cloths; they are now living in double-storeyed houses and driving around in Scorpios and Innovas" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 195). Vaddis sacrifices Kolleru's overall health at the altar of their greed. Their activities along with outside capitalists has damaged the Kolleru lake to an extreme extent. Vaddis has accumulated wealth and capitally prospered at the cost of destruction of the natural waterscape as Ravi, a villager, mourns:

Our village Vaddis have flourished so much because of the fish ponds. Recently they put in a petition for an airport in our village because some fish were getting spoilt in the lorry. The Income Tax fellows came and raided their houses. In each house they found gunny sacks filled with five hundred and thousand rupee notes under their cots. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 191)

Notwithstanding, ecosystem people like Srinivasa, Radhakrishna consider land, water of Kolleru crucial "public wealth" to sustain lives of the inhabitants within Kolleru (Žižek, 2022, p. 44). But the fishermen have bound the lake's water as their private property for fish farming. This act leads to the breaking of indigenous relationships between people and nature. The communal system of sustaining life is disrupted by capitally charged private ownership of Kolleru's water. These practices of private ownership have destroyed the overall health of Kolleru and the habitats.

The contaminated waterbody, poisoned land and polluted weather turned the area near Kolleru inhabitable. The people within Kolleru have been forced to endure the polluted habitat, which has lost its life sustaining capabilities by losing its natural resources like land and drinking sweet water. The state of the Kolleru's people become what Žižek (2022) calls as "eco-proletarians": these people suffer the ecological expropriation and poverty because the environment is destroyed due to extraction and misuse of natural resources, and they are left no alternatives but to become "homeless refugees in their own land" (p. 46). The degradation of Kolleru is so insignificant in profit making capitalistic ideologies that they are overlooked.

Justin McBrien (2016) in his essay "Accumulating Extinction Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene" argues that the deterioration of climate and capital accumulation have become entangled (p. 117). The novel exhibits two contrasting pictures of Kolleru through the memory of Srinivasa. Firstly, from the past, a beautiful, nurturing, waterscape of Kolleru "full of greenery, grasses, bulrushes, fragrant flowering shrubs and a wealth of other wild green weeds and colourful flowers swaying in the breeze" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 4-5). Secondly, the narrator mourns for the slowly dying image of Kolleru. Once the life-giving Kolleru has been turned into "a filthy pond" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2). The flowing water is bounded for fish farming. Previously, varieties of fishes were lively and had flourished in the lake are now "being bred for the market and were perishing of pollution in the fishponds" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2). Incorporating Donna Haraway's (2016) perceives that economic endeavours under capitalocene creates a great threat towards ecological stability (p. 47). The water of the Kolleru gradually has been getting stagnant, the industrial pollutants have worsened the state of the Kolleru, eventually the lake becomes a profit making 'machine' and a garbage.

Catastrophe is inevitable when capitalism is enmeshed in nature. Capitalistic activities of the people of Kolleru proves that "capitalism plus Nature=Catastrophe" (Moore, 2016, p. 4). Kutumbarao articulates a change from substantive farming and fishing to profit making business. This extractive nature of fish farming at the cost of depletion of waterscape signifies the profit based, corporate driven practices. Believing in the ideas of exceptionalism and exemptionalism, the capitalists do not bother themselves for the overall health of the environment (Malm, 2016, p. 391). They only concern the accumulation of profit at any cost even if it demands the irrevocable destruction of the environment. However, they defend their misdeed by arguing "nature and time will heal" (Nixon, 2011, p. 21). The ideologies of capitalism use this narrative to cover up the harmful effects brought upon the environment due to their inconsiderate activities. This attitude towards Kolleru lake destroyed it completely (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 196). They forgot to coexist with nature. However, they realised what they brought upon themselves and the waterscape, but in vain, it was too late. Hence, in the capitalocene, nature has become a commodity at the hands of capitalists. Thus, the enmeshing of nature and capitalism eventually casts destruction upon human, non-human and environment.

The capitalistic ventures of this epoch are the driving force of the deterioration of the environment. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018) in his article "Anthropocene Time" states:

Many argue about the politics of the name and propose, for instance, that the epoch be more properly called "the Capitalocene" or "econo-cene" so that a vague and undifferentiated humanity—"anthropos"—is not held responsible for bringing about this time and that the blame is laid squarely at the door of a system: capitalism or the global economic system. (p. 6)

In this capitalocene, urbanisation, capitalist industrialisation, and commodification of natural resources are responsible for bringing destruction over the environment including waterscapes. However, Amitav Ghosh (2016) soundly argues that, "Every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense, every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change" (p. 115). The Vaddis from Pulaparru village are equally responsible with the capitalists from urban areas, for the deterioration of Kolleru. Vaddis's greed for over accumulation has enchanted them to exploit the resources of Kolleru, as Radhakrishna, a villager, express:

The collective farming went well for five or six years. Then the trouble started. As soon as everyone began to have some money each one thought he was a hero. These people began to say, why should the Vaddis have the fish in the Chinnagundam? The Vaddis said, not just the Chinnagundam but even the fish in the creeks you have made to let water into the fields belong to us. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 189)

This capitalistic act cast irrevocable consequences upon the freshwater ecology, as the Vaddis contaminated it with a mega number of fish ponds and chemicals. In addition to that, industrial waste from the near urban areas like Vijayawada and Eluru have toxified the mighty Kolleru. As Vandana Shiva (2006) states, "The "ownership" of the rich is based on the "dispossession" of the poor" (p. 2). Due to this toxification, the people within Kolleru have left no choice. They have started to fetch drinking water from another village (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 194). Radhakrishna, Srinivasa's friend, claims:

Because the oxygen in the Krishna canal has gone down completely and it has emerged that the reason for it is that all kinds of waste are being let into it. From the fish food to the medicines everything is toxic waste. All that rots further and flows into the Kolleru. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 194)

The destruction of Kolleru lake by polluting it with industrial waste, "pesticides used in agriculture and the toxic waste" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 194) degrades it's

intrinsic value and degenerate Kolleru into "cheap nature" as for "capitalism, nature is cheap" (Moore, *Anthropocene* 2). Moore (2016) argues, "Nature is "cheap" in a double sense: to make Nature's elements "cheap" in price; and also to cheapen, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price" (pp. 2-3). These "two moments are entwined" to bolster capitalist growth (Moore, 2016, p. 3). By making "cheap" in both senses, the capitalist and the intruders want to capture the lake area for capitalist exploitation. Moreover, the corrupted greedy, politicians, want to reduce, "Kolleru to forty-five thousand acres, release the rest from the Wetland Protection Act and take over the released fifty-five acres into their control" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 195), in order to exploit the released part of the lake for capital gain without any opposition.

To conclude, in the capitalocene, the capitalist agendas thrive on the exploitation of the environment. A certain strata of people tend to control, acquire and over-consume the natural resources, in exchange deplete the overall planetary health. Intoxicated by capitalistic gain, these people forget to live in harmony with multiple species. Kutumbarao's (2020) *Softly Dies a Lake*, presents such a devastating picture of the lake Kolleru and its inhabitants, including human, water, animals, birds, fishes, and other life forms. The narrator Srinivasa's vivid memory of Kolleru's glorious past contrasts with the present state of the waterscape which becomes "a filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs" (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2) at the hands of capitalism. However, the story of this depleted lake creates the urgency to change human attitude towards the environment and planetary courses.

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